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The Mediumship of Maria Silbert

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Maria Silbert is described as "a medium who was a simple ever-smiling woman [who] never gained anything by her mediumistic faculties. She was always ready to help, she saved thousands from despair and misery, and sacrificed herself, in spite of years of illness, for science and her suffering fellow-creatures". Maria (1866-1936) was born at Friesach, the eldest child of three, and as so often happens in such cases, was often in trouble when her mediumistic faculties became apparent. After leaving school, she became a teacher and then married: amidst a growing family, with a child being born to the couple each year, her mediumistic abilities continued, these often causing her anxiety.

When her husband, a government official, had to work in Baden-amder-Main, he met someone who, on hearing about Maria's abilities, asked that he have a sitting with her; she was reluctant, but eventually agreed, but no phenomena occurred. After her husband exerted some pressure, she agreed to sit regularly, for a short time, every day, and within a short time, rapping's were heard: 'Maria Silbert's mediumship had begun'. Following this, regular rapping's were heard when Maria sat: one of the first regular communicators was Dr Franciscus Nell, who occupied the leading role in Maria's sittings from thereon. In contrast to this good news, in 1915 with World War I raging, Maria was confronted by her husband's death, the critical illness of one of her sons, and the news that another of her sons had gone missing.

With her husband's death, Maria lost her home and moved to Graz where Adalbert Evian, the author of *The Mediumship of Maria Silbert*, met her. He began to have sittings with the developing medium, and in the first, rapping's were heard and he recalls how, in addition to this phenomenon, "Suddenly I felt as if a hand were being laid on my knee. I distinctly saw the impressions of the five fingers". Following this, he witnessed the levitation of the table and rapping being made on the surface, by which a message for him was given.

He records how, "this, my first sitting, impressed me deeply". He adds that the seances were held in a large dining room: the table was situated in the middle, and he comments that it, "was so heavy that one person couldn't lift it alone". Furthermore, "the light came in unhindered" and that in this room, "nearly all the sittings took place, generally in full daylight or with artificial light". Questions In

Foreign Language Evian continued to have sittings with Maria and noticed how she began to fall into trance more frequently; in these, she was able to answer questions, but of significance was the fact that she would answer questions that were merely thought rather than spoken aloud. Of further significance was that questions could be asked in a foreign language (e.g. Latin, Greek) and yet the answer would still be given through Maria even though she only spoke German.

The rapping phenomenon continued and Evian reports how on one occasion, this was particularly forceful: "The blows came as if with an axe on the table, and the wood began to split. Finally it burst asunder . . .". During the years of the First World War, Maria was able to bring comfort to the wives and mothers who had lost husbands and sons in the fighting. In these sittings, materializations occurred: one sitter, a Mrs W., whose son had been missing for a year, had a sitting with Maria and during this, the other sitters saw a figure in uniform aside Mrs W., who said, "I seemed to have my son standing by me. I even felt his kiss on my neck, just as he used to kiss me". She then realized through this manifestation that her missing son was actually dead and asked those present: "Was it really my son that you saw?". At this, "there was a loud knock and then came the message: "Oh Mother, don't grieve, I am safe". Due to the pressures experienced, i.e. sittings being held every day, and often to the early hours of the morning, Maria agreed to a period of rest. During this time, her missing son returned home, and after a period of recuperation, she decided to resume the séances: at these, "besides the phenomena already experienced, new types of phenomena occurred". "One of the more remarkable types was the engraving of initials or a name on objects brought to the séances. The engravings, by the next-world visitors, were sought after by most sitters and Evian notes that during this time, Maria was continually under control . . . never allowed out of sight...could not, with the best will in the world, in this short moment, even if she had been the best possible juggler, have engraved these".

In addition to object movement, Maria's mediumship, still not fully developed, sometimes affected unpleasant phenomena. Loud Breathing On one occasion - the sitters heard loud breathing that was followed by each sitter being punched; this was followed by them being drenched in what appeared to be a downpour of rain even though they were in the séance room. Maria's dog, who was present during the séance, was whining and after the lights were turned on, was as wet as the sitters. Evian notes that Nell was not overseeing the séance in this instance. Nell had warned Maria of the serious nature of mediumship and the communications that took place: he stressed the problems that would occur if frivolous communications were given freedom. Evian describes one séance when Nell was once again not present and the very events about which he had warned, occurred. A communicator made himself known when Maria's children were present and were becoming bored with the lack of activity. One of the sitters was punched, the table levitated and was followed by the musical instruments in the room being played. After this, the sitters could hear footsteps in the nearby bathroom. At this point, the séance came to a close and Evian continues by detailing how there were some twenty-five pairs of shoes in the bathroom that were intended for the district's poor. He describes how, "Now the first pair marched out, followed by a second and third pair, and then a whole line of others . . . We stared speechless". The sitters were now becoming unnerved and Maria called for this activity to cease which it duly did.

Not surprisingly, Nell subsequently warned against allowing this type of phenomenon to happen again. Wholly Misunderstood After the War ended, Maria had many more sitters, although some, as today, wholly misunderstood the purpose of mediumship. Evian records how, "questions about lottery-numbers were everyday events, questions about horses and so forth. But Nell always refused to answer questions that had to do with money or personal advantage". Fortunately, there were many who appreciated the true value of Maria's abilities and through this, she could provide excellent evidence of survival.

On one occasion, Maria had a sitting with six members of the medical profession and in the midst of a pleasant sitting, urgent rapping by Nell interrupted the proceedings: "It was like a madman, beating both his fists on the keys of a piano". Nell requested the prayers of the sitters for someone who was at that very moment dying; after their prayers, they asked Nell to whom he was referring and he gave the name of a member of the secret police who had been seen only the night before. Shortly after the séance, Maria received a call from the wife of the man whom Nell had mentioned, and she told Maria that her husband had been shot by rioters earlier that same evening. Evian also details how Maria was able to prevent suicides by people grieving the loss of their loved ones.

Herr W., was the only son of a devoted mother, and he often had sittings with Maria, an activity of which his mother disapproved. Herr W. died and subsequently communicated at Maria's séances pleading that his grieving mother be helped. However there was obviously nothing that could be done, as Maria could not demand that people attend her séances; and particularly so in this case when the mother was so hostile to spirit communication. Some time passed and a regular sitter asked whether she could bring another woman, whom she had just met at a local cemetery, into the séance; Maria agreed and the woman came into the house and apart from the usual greetings, no other conversation took place. Much to Maria's dismay, rapping's began to be made; she had in fact asked Nell to ensure that this did not occur as she thought the woman would be unnerved.

The rapping's became louder and the message was taken down and Maria was bewildered by its contents; this being a warning that the woman should not do as she had planned as "you would only get further away from me". The woman began to weep and then told Maria that she in fact was Herr W.'s mother, and had become more and more depressed and that very day had decided to take her own life by poison. Entranced After this, "Maria Silbert became entranced and [Herr] W. spoke simply to his mother in words that fell like balm upon her heart . . . Maria Silbert awakened and saw a completely changed Frau W. before her. Out of her eyes looked new courage to face life". From this time, she had regular sittings with Maria, also bringing her husband.

Maria travelled to Britain and gave successful demonstrations of her mediumship with the British College of Psychical Research. Here, "for instance, she was sewn into a sack, electric handcuffs were placed upon her wrists . . . Instantaneous photographs of her were simultaneously taken by flashlight, from every side". These séances were attended by various professional magicians and academics. Fodor refers to Maria Silbert as a "powerful Austrian medium", and that "the standing of

Frau Silbert on the Continent is high"; he also refers to séances with unsympathetic English investigators.

Bestermann gave an account of a séance with Maria (Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, (38), November 1928), and while admitting that some of the phenomena were interesting and he could not explain, he nevertheless accused her of fraud. Fodor adds that his report "was scathingly criticised and denounced by well-known investigators all over the Continent and in England". Evian continues by noting how "in time Maria Silbert's fame spread so far abroad that every day enquiries came to her from the most varied institutes". Maria continued to provide séances despite her poor health (she suffered from diabetes) and died on 30, August, 1936, after which Evian wrote: "Now she is where, all her life, she longed to be; now she can understand and know all that is still hidden from us, all that we seek, all that we desire".